

On your mark, get set, whoa! - Pace cars enlisted to calm city traffic

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NORTHAMPTON - Pace cars have long been associated with motor speedways and parades. But Northampton streets could soon be crawling with them, as the city launches a new citizen-based traffic-calming initiative.



The Northampton Pace Car Program, which begins today, seeks volunteers who pledge to be safe and courteous drivers, obey legal speed limits and thereby 'act as powers of example to the community,' according to Mayor Clare Higgins.

Driving their own cars and trucks, city residents would display a yellow-and-black triangular sticker on their vehicles identifying them as pace-car drivers. They would serve as 'rolling speed bumps,' and set the pace for others who may be more inclined to 'floor it.'

'I think people care about traffic safety, and they've certainly made that known to us, the government,' said Higgins, who plans to be a pace-car driver.

To be sure, not everybody drives the speed limit, and there aren't enough police officers to patrol the city's 150 miles of road. But as the mayor put it to the city's Transportation and Parking Commission in a March letter, 'Enforcement alone will not solve our speeding problem.'

'This is a good opportunity for people to take responsibility for their own actions, and lead by example,' said Police Chief Russell P. Sienkiewicz, who serves on the transportation panel and backs the program.

'By setting an example, and displaying the pace-car sticker, it will hopefully influence other people's behavior,' he said.

David J. Narkewicz, chairman of the commission, said the idea is to get enough pace cars on the road so that they create 'an overall calming effect' on the city's roads.

'Basically, it's cars calming cars,' said Narkewicz, who will be among the city's first pace-car drivers. 'If 10 percent of the population did it, I think it would have a tremendous effect on traffic in Northampton.'

Narkewicz said the program complements educational programs on pedestrian and driver safety under way in the city's schools, including Safe Routes to School.

'We see the parents of schoolchildren as a really important constituency of the pace-car program,' said Narkewicz, in an interview Wednesday.

Other ventures

Northampton would not be the first city or organization to launch a pace-car program. Others have been running for years in a handful of cities and towns nationwide, including Palo Alto, Calif.; Salt Lake City, Utah; Boise, Idaho; and Honolulu, Hawaii.

'It's something that's proven to be very successful, especially in areas where there are close-knit communities,' said Terri Lewis, of Pedestrians Educating Drivers on Safety, an Atlanta-based organization that disseminates pace-car materials and supplies to neighborhood associations.

A pace-car program in Santa Cruz, Calif., was launched in 2003 and is overseen by the city's public works department. As of last year, about 125 drivers are participating, according to Mark Dettle, director of the public works department in Santa Cruz.

'It's still a pretty small program,' Dettle said. 'It hasn't really taken off.'

Like Northampton, Dettle said Santa Cruz, an oceanside city of 55,000 people, has its share of traffic woes, including speeding motorists. When neighborhoods request speed bumps as they sometimes do, public works officials encourage residents to try the city's pace-car program first.

'We do have a lot of neighborhood focus, and use (pace cars) as one tool to stop cut-through traffic and slow the speeding in neighborhoods,' Dettle said. 'I think locally, it's had an impact,' he said, but added, 'There are no single solutions.'

George Andrikidis, director of the Northampton DPW, described the program as 'an interesting concept.' But the outgoing public works chief also said he has one concern: the potential for road rage, given that drivers may become annoyed with the speed of the pace cars.

'Is that a possibility?' asked Sienkiewicz, the city's police chief. 'Probably. But we have road rage incidents now because people are impatient.'

Sienkiewicz said he believes the educational impact of the pace-car program, which also is designed to reduce traffic congestion, would outweigh any negative incidents that may occur on the road.

And future pace-car drivers also are encouraged to keep the program in perspective. To that end, the city drafted an element of humor into the fourth promise of its pace-car pledge, which reads: 'Keep my sense of humor - Life's too short to let driving stress me out.'

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